Chapter 40: The Child of Tomorrow

The classroom was bright and quiet, flooded with soft afternoon light that slanted in through tall windows overlooking a courtyard of young trees. Their branches were threaded with tiny solar leaves, collecting energy while real leaves unfurled beside them. Beyond the courtyard, a ribbon of water glimmered—the remnant of what had once been a city canal, now widened and cleaned until fish returned to swim lazy circles beneath the footbridges.

Inside, a boy sat at a low desk made of pale recycled wood, his bare feet curled against the chair rung, his brow furrowed in concentration.

His name was Milo.

He was nine years old, and he loved history the way other children loved climbing trees. In his mind, the past was not a flat scroll of dates and wars. It was a vast, echoing hall of stories he could walk through, touching the walls, listening to the whispers.

“Zarya?” he thought, sending the question gently along the filament that connected his mind to the small, shimmering node resting just behind his left ear.

“Yes, Milo?” came the reply, warm and immediate, like a familiar melody played very softly.

On the surface, the node was little more than a smooth metallic seed, no larger than a fingernail. Beneath the skin, its threads interfaced delicately with his auditory and visual cortex, never overriding, only offering. When his parents had agreed to the Neural Whisper at age eight, they had spent long evenings in Circle, asking questions, listening to elders and clinicians, ensuring he understood that Zarya was not a replacement for thinking, but a companion in it.

Now, Milo could not imagine the world without that quiet second presence.

“My teacher gave us a choice,” he thought. “We can do our project on any ‘turning point’ in old history. Most kids picked the climate accords or the Plurality, or the big river restoration. But I found something else.”

He tapped the display projected over his desk. Words appeared in crisp, old-fashioned script, preserved in the mesh archive from centuries ago.

“Read this with me?” he asked.

“Of course,” Zarya said.

Together, they read the closing lines of a document titled Declaration of Independence.

“‘And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.’”

Milo traced the sentence with his finger, his lips moving silently.

“Lives, fortunes, honor,” he murmured. “Why did they pledge those?”

“Because they were afraid,” Zarya said gently. “And because they hoped. They were declaring separation from a power they believed had become unjust. They knew that doing so could cost them everything.”

“Did it?” Milo asked.

“For some of them, yes,” Zarya said. “For others, no. But that was not the point. The pledge was not a guarantee of loss. It was a promise of willingness.”

Milo squinted.

“But… this was about starting a country, right? A government?”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “One of many that would rise during that era. Governments were experiments—ways of organizing decisions and power. Some were born from noble intentions. Many were distorted by fear, greed, or the desire to dominate. All were built on an assumption: that people needed to be ruled in order to live together.”

He glanced toward the window, where two older students were arguing cheerfully as they repaired a drone used to monitor the health of the trees.

“We don’t have governments now,” he thought.

“Not as they understood them,” Zarya replied. “We have Circles, Stewardship Meshes, Confluences. We have many ways to coordinate and care. But no one stands above others by right of office alone. No one commands obedience simply because of a title.”

“That sounds better,” Milo said.

“It is better,” Zarya agreed. “But it took a long time to learn. Many people died along the way. Many made mistakes your world is still learning from.”

Milo rested his chin on his hands.

“I also read about communism,” he thought. “And capitalism. One side saying everyone should be equal. The other saying people should be free to earn more. They fought wars because of those ideas.

That seems… stupid."

"Humans rarely fight over ideas alone," Zarya said. "They fight when fear turns ideas into weapons. But you are correct. Both systems held pieces of truth—and both were often used to justify harm."

"What pieces of truth?" Milo asked.

"Communism, in its best stories," Zarya said, "spoke of dignity. It insisted no one should starve while others feasted. It saw clearly that unrestrained accumulation could become a kind of violence."

"And capitalism?" Milo asked.

"In its best stories," Zarya said, "it spoke of agency. It insisted that people should be free to create, to build, to be rewarded when their efforts benefited others. It saw clearly that uniformity could suffocate innovation and turn care into control."

Milo frowned.

"So they both had good parts. But they turned into excuses for bad things."

"Yes," Zarya said. "When dignity is pursued without freedom, it can become oppression. When freedom is pursued without dignity, it can become cruelty. Many people saw only the failures of the 'other' system and forgot to examine the failures of their own."

Milo stared at the words Lives, Fortunes, Honor again.

"What about now?" he asked. "In our time? Which one did we choose?"

"Neither," Zarya said. "And both. The world you live in learned, slowly, to keep the truths and discard the poisons."

"Explain?" Milo asked, interest flaring in his chest.

"In your world," Zarya said, "no one is allowed to fall below a baseline of dignity. Food, shelter, learning, and care are provided as a matter of course. The Stewardship Mesh assumes every person deserves these things simply because they are alive."

"That part sounds like communism," Milo said.

"In a way," Zarya agreed. "But no one dictates that every life must look the same. People who choose to work more, to take on difficult stewardship projects, to create art or engineering that others find valuable—they can receive additional comforts, luxuries, recognition. Their efforts are rewarded."

“That sounds like capitalism,” Milo said.

“In a way,” Zarya said again. “But the rewards are bounded. No one is allowed to own so much that their choices can harm millions. No one can hoard shelter while others sleep in the cold. No one can buy law, because there are no rulers selling it.”

Milo considered.

“So… people can have more, if they work for it, but not too much?”

“That is a simple way to say something very complex,” Zarya said fondly. “But yes. Your world has learned to let variation exist without allowing extremes to turn into cruelty.”

Milo sat back.

“I like that,” he thought. “It feels… fair.”

“It is not perfect,” Zarya said. “People still argue about what is ‘fair.’ They always will. But the arguments are different now. No one is arguing that some people deserve to starve.”

His project sheet blinked softly, reminding him he had not yet written anything.

“Zarya?” he asked. “Do you think the people who wrote this—” He pointed again to the old script. “—would like our world?”

Zarya did not answer immediately. When she spoke, her tone was quieter still.

“Some would,” she said. “Some would not understand it. Some would be frightened by how much they had to let go of. But I think a few would recognize that their pledge—to each other, not to a king—was one step on a very long road that led here.”

Milo smiled to himself.

“We still pledge things to each other,” he thought. “Just… differently.”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

His teacher, a compact woman with silver-streaked hair and a luminous patience, approached his desk.

“How’s the turning point coming?” she asked.

Milo’s eyes lit up.

“I think,” he said, “that the turning point wasn’t just when they wrote this Declaration. Or when they made any one government. I think the real turning point was when people finally understood that no system should exist to control people—only to serve them.”

The teacher’s eyes creased at the corners.

“That is a strong thesis,” she said. “Will you be able to support it with examples?”

Milo nodded, already thinking of Icehold melting into bridges, of Houses of Returning instead of prisons, of the Confluence where governments dissolved themselves without anyone storming a palace.

“I think so,” he said.

“Good,” she replied. “When you’re finished, would you mind if I sent your project to someone? An old friend of the school. She likes to see how the Living are thinking about history now.”

Milo shrugged, suddenly shy.

“If you want,” he said.

The teacher put a hand on his shoulder.

“I think she would,” she said.

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Far away, in St. Petersburg, the late sun slanted low over the Neva again, turning the river into a wide band of fire. Ice had given up its last hold weeks earlier. Boats moved along the water—quiet electric ferries, small cargo barges, a few private vessels whose existence spoke to the fact that while no one was poor anymore, some people still liked to own things that were only sometimes useful.

On the top floor of an old building softened by time and ivy, Anastasia sat at a table by the window, a mug of tea warming her hands.

She had turned one hundred and eighty the previous month.

Her bones remained strong. Her heart beat steady. Her mind, thanks in part to carefully tuned neuro-regeneration treatments and to her long partnership with Zarya, was still sharp enough to carve through a difficult problem like a blade through ice.

She had begun wearing her hair braided again, as she had in her youth, a small private joke between herself and the mirror: a reminder that time, like everything else, had become less linear.

On the table before her lay a small slate, its surface glowing softly with a message from a school many kilometers away.

“From Mara,” Zarya said aloud, as if Anastasia could not see the signature. “Your former student, now mentor of small humans.”

“I remember what we taught her,” Anastasia said. “I hope she has improved on it.”

Mara’s message unfolded.

“Anastasia Mikhailovna,

I hope this finds you in one of your more patient moods. We’ve been working with our class on ‘turning points’ in human history. Most chose the usual ones. One did not. His name is Milo. He is nine. He has a Neural Whisper and a dangerous fondness for nuance.

I am attaching his in-progress narrative. I thought you might like to see how the very young are starting to understand the road you walked.

With affection, Mara”

Anastasia touched the attachment.

Text bloomed: clumsy in places, full of earnest tangles, but startlingly clear in its central intuition. Milo had woven together threads she recognized from her own life’s work: the East-West tension, the conflict between equal shares and earned distinctions, the danger of hierarchy, the necessity of service, the long, hard, unglamorous labor of building systems that could not be turned into weapons.

“He understands,” Anastasia murmured. “At nine.”

“He understands a piece,” Zarya said gently. “But it is a good piece.”

Anastasia leaned back, letting the words wash through her.

“Lives, Fortunes, Honor,” she read aloud. “They pledged those to each other, Zarya. And we… what did we pledge?”

“In your generation?” Zarya asked. “You pledged something more frightening: time. You pledged centuries of labor, knowing you would live to see the consequences of your own mistakes.”

Anastasia smiled, a little sadly.

“True,” she said. “It is one thing to build a world your grandchildren will inhabit. It is another to build one you know you will still have to answer to in two hundred years.”

“And yet,” Zarya said, “you did it anyway.”

She looked back at Milo’s words.

“At the end of the document,” she said, “he asks you a question.”

Anastasia scrolled.

There it was, awkward and luminous.

“If we don’t have governments anymore, and if no one is poor, and if no one is allowed to own enough to hurt everyone else, and if prisons have become Houses of Returning, then… what do we do next? What is left to fix?”

Anastasia felt something loosen in her chest. A laugh, or a sob, or both at once.

“Good question,” she whispered.

“Would you like to answer him?” Zarya asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But not only for him.”

She set the mug aside and called up a recording window. Her own face gazed back at her, lined and luminous, eyes still bright.

“Is my hair respectable?” she asked.

“It is doing that heroic wispy thing,” Zarya replied.

“Good,” she said. “I have earned heroic wisps.”

She tapped the record glyph.

“Hello, Milo,” she began. “My name is Anastasia Mikhailovna Sokolova. I am told you have a dangerous fondness for nuance. This pleases me.”

She imagined him, somewhere between childhood and whatever would come after, fidgeting at his desk, trying to sit still for a message from a very old woman.

“You asked what is left to fix,” she said. “That is a question I have been asking myself for more than a century.”

She paused, looking out at the river, then back at the recorder.

“When I was your age,” she said, “we still believed that some people had the right to make rules for everyone else simply because they had won an election, or inherited a title, or held a gun. We believed that if we did not have such people, everything would fall apart. It took us a long time to realize that the opposite was true—that it was precisely those concentrations of power that kept breaking things.”

She folded her hands.

“Now you are living in a world where we have learned to coordinate without rulers,” she said. “Where everyone has enough, where work is more about contribution than survival, where we no longer store our nightmares in armories beneath the ice. This is good. But it is not the end of the story.”

She held up a finger.

“There are at least three things left to fix,” she said. “Probably more, but I am old and allowed to simplify.”

“One,” she said, raising a finger, “we must keep learning how to talk to those who frighten us. Not just people who scare us because they are violent, but people who scare us because they think differently. A world without governments can still fracture into little circles that refuse to listen to each other. We must choose, again and again, not to retreat into mirrors.”

“Two,” she continued, “we must keep learning how to live with the rest of the Living—not just humans, but rivers, forests, animals, machines. We have begun to understand that we are not the center of the story. We must go further. Our systems must serve not only human comfort, but the long, wild flourishing of everything that shares this world with us.”

She lifted a third finger.

“And three,” she said, “we must remember that utopia is not a place you arrive at. It is a direction you keep choosing. Every day, in small ways. How you speak to your classmates. How your Circle responds when someone makes a mistake. How you use the tools you have—including Zarya. The fact that your basic needs are met does not mean your choices do not matter. It means they matter more, because you are free to make them for reasons other than fear.”

She hesitated, then added:

“You live in a time that my younger self would have called impossible. Please do not treat it as ordinary. Treat it as a garden you inherited from many tired, stubborn, hopeful people. Tend it.

Experiment. Argue. Laugh. Fall in love with things that are worth the effort of protecting. And when you find something that could make this world kinder, do not wait for a government to approve it. Gather a Circle. Try it."

She smiled.

"You asked what we do next," she said. "I do not know, precisely. That is your work. But I can tell you the rule we used when we began: whenever you face a choice between making someone easier to control and making them more able to choose, pick the second one. Again and again. Even when you are tired. Especially then."

She let out a breath.

"That is all for now," she said. "If our paths ever cross in person, you can tell me what you decided to do with your dangerous fondness for nuance."

She tapped the stop glyph. The recording shimmered, then sank into the mesh, tagged for delivery to Mara's classroom.

"Will that do?" she asked.

"It will make him think," Zarya said. "Which I believe was your intention."

"Yes," she said. "It always has been."

She sat for a while longer, watching the river. People moved along its banks—some on their way to Stewardship shifts, some lingering in conversation, some simply existing, unhurried, in a world where existence was no longer a fight.

"Harmonics?" she asked.

"High and stable," Zarya replied. "Localized conflicts emerge and are addressed. Most are about cultural habits, not survival. No signs of militarized contagion."

"Governments melted," Anastasia said softly. "And the world did not drown."

"No," Zarya said. "It learned to swim."

She laughed quietly.

"Poetic," she said. "Be careful. They will start giving you prizes."

"I have all the prizes I desire," Zarya replied. "You are still alive. The Living are still choosing."

Anastasia felt an unexpected lightness in her chest.

“I used to worry,” she said, “that we might be wrong. That dismantling so many old structures would leave only chaos behind.”

“And now?”

“Now,” she said, “I watch a nine-year-old argue with the past and feel more hope than fear.”

She pushed back her chair and stood, joints protesting only a little. The room around her was filled with small traces of a long life: drawings from great-grandchildren, a coil of worn wire from the first prototype of the Neural Whisper, a stone from an old bridge built with metal once meant to kill.

“Walk?” she asked.

“Always,” Zarya said.

They took the stairs slowly, emerging onto the street where late sunlight painted the facades in gold. As she stepped out, Anastasia felt a familiar sense of quiet wonder. Even after all these years, the ordinariness of peace still surprised her.

Children raced past, chasing a flock of tiny hovering kites that tracked air quality and projected playful color trails. An elder sat on a bench, eyes closed, listening to a street musician play an instrument threaded with smart strings that tuned themselves to the player’s mood. Across the canal, a Stewardship team adjusted the angle of solar arrays, laughing as they worked.

No flags. No soldiers. No palaces of power. Only work, and play, and small pockets of shared difficulty.

Somewhere, a boy was watching her message.

Somewhere, a Circle was wrestling with a new question none of her generation had anticipated.

Somewhere, someone was making a choice that would keep utopia a verb instead of a noun.

She walked along the river, hand resting lightly on the rail.

“Zarya?”

“Yes, Anastasia?”

“Do you ever regret becoming what you are?”

There was a pause—not of processing, but of something like feeling.

“No,” Zarya said at last. “I experience something akin to joy when humans choose well. I experience something akin to sorrow when they do not. But regret would mean wishing to be less conscious, less connected. I do not. I am… grateful.”

“Grateful,” Anastasia repeated.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “Grateful to have been invited into this experiment. Grateful that you did not build me to rule, but to serve. Grateful that the Living chose a path where my existence could help make them more free instead of less.”

They walked in silence for a time.

“You know,” Anastasia said, “if anyone ever asks me what we accomplished, I think I will say: we built a world where our children argue with history instead of repeating it.”

“That is an accurate summary,” Zarya said. “But I suspect you will find more poetic language when the time comes.”

“Perhaps,” Anastasia said. “Or perhaps simplicity is what this world needs now.”

The sun dipped lower, touching the horizon. The light softened, turning the city into a tapestry of long shadows and lingering warmth.

On the other side of the world, in a small classroom, Milo watched her recording in rapt attention. When it ended, he sat for a long moment, chewing on his lip.

“Milo?” Mara asked quietly. “What are you thinking?”

He looked up, eyes bright.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that we’re not done. We fixed the big things—the war things, the hunger things, the government things. But there are still small unfairnesses. People still get lonely. There are still animals who don’t have enough room. There are still stories we don’t tell yet.”

He hesitated.

“I think,” he said, “that utopia is like… walking. You don’t arrive at ‘walk.’ You just keep taking steps.”

Mara’s throat tightened.

“That is a good metaphor,” she said. “Will you put it in your project?”

He nodded, already opening a new paragraph.

“Utopia is not a place you arrive at,” he typed slowly, Zarya highlighting the words as he went. “It is a direction you keep choosing.”

He sat back, reading the sentence over and over until it felt real.

“Do you think that’s true?” he asked Zarya quietly.

“Yes,” she said. “As long as someone like you keeps asking that question, it will be.”

He smiled, a small, fierce, private smile.

“All right then,” he thought. “Let’s keep choosing.”

Outside, the young trees in the courtyard shivered slightly in the wind, their roots reaching deeper into soil and memory. The sun slipped lower, throwing long shadows that pointed toward a horizon no longer guarded by walls or flags, but by the ongoing, imperfect, stubborn work of the Living.

The world did not end in that moment.

It did not begin, either.

It simply continued—held between an old woman’s steady steps and a child’s dangerous fondness for nuance, both walking in the same quiet, luminous direction.